

Mexico's Relations With the United States and Canada

Interview with President Ernesto Zedillo



Photos reprinted courtesy of the President of Mexico's Press Office

Voices of Mexico: *How would you define the current relationship between Mexico and the United States?*

President Zedillo: History and geography makes us neighbors unlike anywhere else in the world. Fortunately, today this relationship is developing through a new understanding based on cooperation, respectful dialogue and friendship. President William Clinton and I have fostered conditions that allow us to openly and maturely look at the differences inherent in two countries that, sharing a 3,200-kilometer border, have different cultures and levels of development. At the same time, the new political understanding we have promoted facilitates our taking advantage of the ample opportunities and interests we have in common to the benefit of our nations and peoples.

This political will has been reiterated in our 10 meetings to facilitate the systematic treatment of our entire bilateral agenda, particularly in high priority areas such as migration, cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking and border issues. Officials from our two countries frequently meet to consult; we have advanced a great deal in institutionalizing our relations, allowing us to discourage unilateral action and preserve the necessary respect for the sovereignty of both Mexico and the United States.

The most important thing about this new understanding is the conviction that we need to establish clear rules for interaction between our two countries. We have done this on the basis of an agenda that, though very complex, can be ordered and divided up and in which we can establish priorities so that when we differ, the discussion of

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With Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

one issue does not negatively affect the entire relationship.

Undoubtedly there will always be new challenges to face, but the most important thing is that we have the determination, the mechanisms and the energy to resolve them.

Proof of this are the periodic meetings over the last two decades of the U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission to dialogue about each and every one of the issues on the bilateral agenda. At the same time, President Clinton and I have made sure we meet at least every six months to personally go into the dynamics of our relations.

Drug trafficking is a global problem with grave repercussions for North America. What do you think about it?

Mexico has said that drug trafficking is a threat to all forms of civilization and demands, therefore, an answer from all the countries of the world. I had the opportunity to reiterate this position in June 1998 before the special session of the United Nations General Assembly proposed by Mexico to discuss drug trafficking and its implications.

There, I said that to deal with this problem, an integral, balanced global strategy is required. If drug trafficking is global, so must our answer be, excluding no one and, above all, without recriminations. An integral strategy means dealing with all the mani-

festations of the problem, from production, distribution, sale and consumption of drugs to other crimes closely linked with this terribly destructive activity. There must also be a balance in each country's participation in the fight against drug trafficking based on co-responsibility. This means that no one can set himself up as a judge of others; no one has the right to put his own law above the law of others.

Mexico and the United States have made significant bilateral efforts in the last five years to strengthen our cooperation in this field. The U.S.-Mexico High Level Contact Group against Drugs, which has operated since 1996, took a very important step with the development of a diagnostic analysis that determined our common focus on the problem of drug trafficking and, therefore, the definition of a bilateral cooperation strategy, which stipulates the principles and framework for our two countries' action in this area. The operation of this high level group has made it possible not only to strengthen cooperation, but also to successfully deal with delicate situations in the fight against drugs without damaging our bilateral relationship as a whole.

Canada has also renewed its cooperation with our country through its new focus on the fight against drugs. In December 1998, the first Mexico/Canada Binational Meeting on Cooperation against Drug Trafficking and the Prevention of Drug Abuse was held.

We also have mechanisms and agreements in this area with many other countries in Latin America and Europe.

The advances in international cooperation in the fight against drugs strengthen Mexico's commitment to join forces and present an effective united front around this international problem.

What do you think of migration in the context of global promotion of human rights?

Human rights must be respected everywhere in the world regardless of the individual's origins, nationality or migratory status. That is why the Mexican government is committed to the defense of every Mexican man and woman no matter where they may be.

In terms of bilateral relations, we have been working with the United States government toward a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of migration, which will help us overcome prejudices and find joint solutions. This is why both our governments promoted the U.S.-Mexico Binational Study on Migration to fully understand the structural dynamic of transborder labor markets and design better strategies using that precise, objective information.

Mexican migrants make an important contribution to the United States economy and we are convinced—and the study bears this out—that they don't go there to compete but rather to hold jobs that the U.S. work force doesn't cover.

What most offends Mexico is the violation of human and labor rights of Mexicans in the United States. That is why mechanisms were established in 1995 to strengthen the consular protection of our countrymen and countrywomen. This is also the basis for our two countries signing the U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration on Migration in 1997, recognizing this as one of our highest bilateral priorities.

We have also sought accords to deal with specific conditions affecting migrants. This is the case, for example, of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation against Border Violence, the bor-

der liaison and follow-up mechanisms for dealing with serious violations of migrants' human rights, as well as the plans for cooperation included in the New Border Vision initiative.

Beyond bilateral relations, I would like to point out that the Regional Conference on Migration was established on Mexico's initiative with the participation of the United States, Canada, the Central American countries and the Dominican Republic, and that the United Nations Human Rights Commission approved by consensus the Initiative on Migrants' Human Rights creating the figure of a special relator.

Relations with Canada have intensified since NAFTA came into effect. What would you say about that?

Our bilateral relationship with Canada is one of the most dynamic in the hemisphere, and it is opening up the road to a true strategic alliance. Our two countries agree that free trade and international cooperation should mean reciprocal benefits that lead to shared development.

As you say, since the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect, relations between Mexico and Canada have intensified, not only with regard to trade, but in all areas of interest to both our countries. In the five years since the treaty came into effect, trade between Mexico and Canada has grown more than 80 percent and now comes to somewhere around U.S.\$7.5 billion a year. Today, Canada is Mexico's third trade partner and vice versa. Canadian investment in Mexico has also grown considerably.

Along with this dynamic trade and financial exchange, we have also moved ahead in cooperation in other respects, such as in energy, mining, communications and transportation, agriculture, health, culture, education and science and technology.

In 1998, we hosted Team Canada, the most important Canadian trade mission that has ever

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visited Mexico, in the hopes of propitiating new trade and investment opportunities. When Prime Minister Jean Chrétien made his official visit to Mexico, we signed the document *New Directions: Mexico-Canada 1999, Declaration of Objectives and Action Plan* which is a reflection of our desire to respond appropriately to the lively bilateral dynamic. This all makes it possible for us to anticipate an ever greater complementary role for our two nations for the twenty-first century.

What is your view of ecological problems in North America for the new millennium?

Closer trade ties among Canada, the United States and Mexico have opened up spaces and established commitments for greater collaboration on environmental questions. This is very important for guaranteeing sustainable development in coming years in the region.

The Environmental Cooperation Commission, made up of the three NAFTA signers, has developed a triennial program with a view toward the year 2001. The plan proposes to stimulate environmental sustainability in a free market framework and its central areas of work are the environment, conservation of biodiversity and legislation and environmental policies.

The importance of the environmental issues that concern the region demand an unprecedented degree of binational and trinational cooperation among Canada, the United States and Mexico. For that reason, the commission is mandated to contribute to reaching consensus and a full understanding of the environmental challenge in North America. This common understanding will also provide a solid basis for more effective cooperation in regional actions.

Mexico and the United States are also working hard on the Border XXI Program that is stimulating joint efforts in the public, social and private spheres on both sides of the border to ensure development

compatible with public health and the well being of our ecosystems.

The North American Free Trade Agreement has been regarded both as a panacea and the cause of all our problems. What is your opinion?

I think that reasoning like that, on either of the two extremes, is a bit exaggerated. The North American Free Trade Agreement is simply a tool—a very important one no doubt, but only a tool—to better take advantage of the enormous commercial and productive potential shared by Canada, the United States and Mexico to the benefit of our peoples and respective economies. Fortunately, the trade agreement has shown itself to be fundamentally beneficial for the three signers. Almost six years after it came into effect, NAFTA has contributed enormously to the region's economic growth, beyond all original expectations. Intra-regional trade grew 75 percent from 1993 to 1998, 12 percent a year on the average. In absolute terms, the value of trade among the three countries came to almost U.S.\$530 billion in 1998, U.S.\$227 billion more than in 1993. And the dynamism born of the trade opening continues to increase. This is shown by the fact that during the first eight months of 1999, trade among the three countries came to more than U.S.\$380 billion, over 11 percent more than in the same period in 1998. Last year, for the first time, intraregional exports were higher than the three countries' total exports to other regions of the world. From 1993 to 1998, Mexico increased its share of total regional exports from 14 to 19 percent.

On a bilateral level, since NAFTA has been in effect, our trade with the United States has grown more than 120 percent, an average of 17 percent annually. Today, Mexico is the United States' second trade partner. As I said before, Mexican trade with Canada has increased 80 percent in the same period. All of this has been very important, partic-



With President William Clinton.

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ularly because of the thousands and thousands of jobs that have been created in our three countries.

The treaty has also been an encouragement to closer cooperation in other areas of importance like protecting the environment and in the spheres of labor and science and technology, among many others.

NAFTA has contributed to a more integrated North American market by strengthening trade, lowering barriers and guaranteeing access to the markets of each of its member nations. In that sense, and with regard to any problems that could derive from the accord, we should keep in mind that one of the greatest benefits of having trade agreements is having clear rules and procedures for resolving differences. Clear rules are always better than no rules at all.

I would like to emphasize that free trade represents more and better opportunities for development, and that, therefore, Mexico will continue to be a firm promotor of the trade opening in the hemisphere and with other regions of the world.

What policies do we have for drawing closer to the community of Mexican origin in the United States?

From the beginning of my administration I established the strengthening of a new relationship with Mexican men and women and those of Mexican origin who live and work beyond our borders, par-

ticularly in the United States of America, as one of our foreign policy priorities. To do that we have renewed support to the Program for the Mexican Communities Abroad, which in turn supports civic, cultural and sports activities of these Mexican men and women who for different reasons live far from our homeland.

It is very significant that most of Mexico’s state governments, hundreds of municipal governments and dozens of civic organizations that work both inside and outside of Mexico participate in this new link. The program is getting very good results in matters like adult education and the distribution of schoolbooks for their children, the organization of sports tournaments and preventive medicine.

I have said proudly that the Mexican nation goes beyond our borders and that Mexican migrants are an important part of it. That is why this administration promoted a constitutional amendment to allow Mexicans who wished to take on other nationalities to do so —if they were able— without having to renounce their Mexican nationality.

Any and all efforts to forge closer links between Mexicans living abroad and their country and to make people abroad understand what Mexico is like are and will continue to be welcome. In that sense, I salute the National Autonomous University of Mexico for maintaining an initiative as beneficial as the magazine *Voices of Mexico*. I congratulate those who make this publication possible and wish them every success in their important mission. ■■■